

India-China tensions rise, as New Delhi aligns with Washington

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Geo-political tensions between India and its northern neighbor China are growing ever sharper under conditions where India has integrated itself more deeply into the US's anti-China "Pivot" and, bolstered by Washington's support, is seeking to assert itself as South Asia's regional hegemon and an Indian Ocean power.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a testy meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping earlier this month when he visited China for the G-20 summit in Hangzhou.

In the run up to that visit, Modi's government took a series of provocative moves against Beijing. It increased India's military presence on the border with China, reiterated its support for the US campaign against China over the South China Sea, and in late August signed an agreement with Washington that allows the US military to use Indian bases for refueling, resupply, and relaxation.

At his meeting with Xi, Modi raised, as the Indian media was keen to emphasize, a series of complaints about Beijing's policies.

Most significantly, he amplified India's opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by tying it to the issue of anti-India "terrorism emerging" from areas that are traversed by the CPEC, specifically Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK).

Previously, New Delhi had made the public focus of its opposition to the CPEC—a network of pipelines, and rail and road links connecting Pakistan's Arabian Sea port of Gwadar with western China—the fact that it will run through POK, territory India claims is rightfully hers.

In recent weeks, New Delhi has forcefully reiterated its claim to all of Kashmir, which came to be divided between India and Pakistan through the 1947 communal Partition of the subcontinent and the 1947-48 Indo-Pakistani war. However, short of an all-out war between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, there is no way New Delhi will ever be able to assert its claim to sovereignty over POK.

Its principal concerns are otherwise. The CPEC and the \$46 billion that China is investing in Pakistan to build it constitute a major shot-in-the-arm for Pakistan's

beleaguered economy. The CPEC also has major strategic implications. It strengthens the decades-old and increasingly close ties between Islamabad and Beijing and, if actualized, would provide China with a means of partially circumventing US plans to blockade China's economy by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea "chokepoints" in the event of a war or war crisis.

In his meeting with Xi, Modi also reportedly took China to task for failing to do enough to curb Islamabad's support for "terrorism." Taking direct aim at the relations between China and Pakistan, Modi reputedly told Xi, "Our response to terrorism must not be motivated by political considerations." New Delhi has repeatedly denounced China for blocking its attempt to add Maulana Masooh Azhar, the head of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, an Islamist Kashmir separatist organization, to the United Nations' international terrorist blacklist.

Although he did not outright confirm it, Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Vikas Swarup hinted that Modi also raised with Xi the issue of India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). When asked directly about the NSG issue, Swarup made reference to a statement earlier attributed to Modi about how India and China "must respect each other's aspirations, concerns and strategic interests."

As a strategic "favour" to India, the US has been pressing for its speedy admittance to the NSG. This would facilitate New Delhi's access to dual-application advanced technology. China and nearly a dozen other countries have objected, because India's accession would violate the rule that the NSG members must be signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Under Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, India has dramatically escalated its strategic cooperation with the US. Yet Beijing's response has thus far been cautious and low-key, in marked contrast to its sharp criticisms of Japan and increasingly shrill warnings to Australia, the US's principal treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific region.

Clearly Beijing still hopes it can forestall India becoming a

“frontline state” in the US drive to strategically isolate, encircle and prepare for war on China, and calculates that a more aggressive response would only push India even deeper into the US’s embrace.

“China,” Xi told Modi, “will work with India to maintain their hard-won sound relations and further advance cooperation.”

But the reality is the Indian elite is more and more wedded to its military-strategic partnership with the US, gambling that an alliance with the world principal’s imperialist power will give it a desperately needed leg-up under conditions of world economic crisis and ever-sharpening global geopolitical tensions.

India is collaborating with the US to limit Chinese economic and strategic influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean island-states, while drawing on US support to pursue its own great power ambitions, particularly its reactionary and incendiary rivalry with Pakistan.

India assisted the US-sponsored regime change operation that resulted in Mahinda Rajapakse being ousted by the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena in Sri Lanka’s January 2015 presidential election. Rajapakse had irked Washington and New Delhi by expanding Sri Lanka’s economic ties with China and allowing a Chinese submarine to visit the island in September 2014.

In Nepal, India has taken the lead in countering Chinese influence. From September 2015 to February 2016, it imposed a months-long economic blockade on landlocked Nepal in an effort to compel changes to the country’s new constitution which it deemed would give it greater leverage within Nepali affairs. And, with its behind-the-scenes support, Nepal’s “pro-China” Prime Minister, K.P. Oli, was replaced last month by one deemed more friendly to India.

Washington has also successfully encouraged India to strengthen strategic bilateral and trilateral ties with Japan and Australia, and supported the expansion of its economic and military ties with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

On his way to China, Modi visited Vietnam, whose ties with China are increasingly strained by its US-encouraged dispute with Beijing over the South China Sea and its rapprochement with Washington. In May, US President Obama visited Hanoi.

In recent years India has developed significant economic and military relations with Vietnam, including accepting Vietnamese offers of oil exploration projects in areas of the South China Sea that are also claimed by China.

Modi met with his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and signed twelve agreements covering defence, cybersecurity and trade. These included an Indian offer to provide Vietnam a \$500 million loan for military purchases,

a fivefold increase on a similar \$100 million loan it made to Hanoi in 2014. India is reportedly ready to sell to Vietnam one or more versions of the BrahMos, a supersonic cruise missile it co-developed with Russia. At the conclusion of their talks, Modi and Phuc announced plans to “upgrade our strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership,” a clear message to China that India is ready to play a significant role in the region.

India is also bolstering its military presence on its border with China. In July it was revealed that the Indian Army is in the process of deploying 100 tanks to the Indian frontline in eastern Ladakh, a strategic highland region which overlooks western Tibet. Because of the area’s isolation and inclement weather (temperatures can fall to minus 45 Celsius, making it difficult to keep tanks operational), India has reportedly only ever before deployed tanks to this part of Ladakh in 1962 during its border war with China.

In an interview with the *Hindu*, an Indian military spokesman defended the tank deployment, as well as the construction of military infrastructure in Ladakh, including roads, bridges and artillery installations, as necessary to match China’s efforts to modernize its own military infrastructure across the Line of Actual Control.

In another move that is exacerbating tensions with China, the Modi government approved in early August an allocation of 4300 crore rupees (almost US \$630 million) to fund a new regiment to be deployed to Arunachal Pradesh and armed with a version of the BrahMos cruise missile specially adapted for mountain warfare. Located in India’s northeast, Arunachal Pradesh—or in Chinese parlance southern Tibet—is claimed by Beijing.

In mid-August, the Chinese army’s official mouthpiece, the *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, strongly criticized the impending deployment of supersonic missiles on China’s border, saying it exceeds India’s “own needs for self-defense and poses a serious threat to China’s Tibet and Yunnan provinces.”

“Deploying BrahMos missiles,” continued the *PLA Daily*, “is bound to increase competitiveness and confrontation in Sino-Indian relations and bring a negative influence to stability of the region.”



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